

DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

By Bhikkhu Dhammapala

*“Five causes were there in the past
And now a five-fold fruit
Five causes in this present life
A five-fold fruit to come.”*

When speaking of Origination, one can approach the subject from two different viewpoints. One is the view of those who believe in a supernatural cause and thus maintain an ultimate beginning or creation. To them the Buddha repeatedly declared that an absolute first beginning of existence is something unthinkable, and that all such-like speculations may lead to imbecility (Ang. iv, 77). We shall revert to this view after having explained the Buddha's doctrine of origination.

His doctrine is not fruitless speculation, but is based on actuality. Hence it will be understood best, when as starting point is taken not some imaginary time in the untraceable past, called 'In the beginning -', but an actual fact of the present, which is open to investigation and experiment.

The fact of suffering and the fact that *all* is suffering, because all is impermanent is indeed the actual basis from which one can start the reconstruction pointing towards origination; it is also the basis from where the work of Deliverance can be started.

Unless the fact of suffering is understood as universal, it is impossible to find out its origin, impossible to find deliverance therefrom. Here is no revelation needed, and hence the supernatural signifies nothing; here mere argument avails nothing, for mere words cannot solve an actual problem. And thus we start not with the beginning, but with the actual, experimental fact that life is sorrow-fraught.

Now it is clear that this sorrow and disappointment, due to the impermanence of all things, is only possible where there is conscious life to perceive the same. Thus we have the well-known formula: *jati paccaya jara-maranan*: dependent on birth is old age, death and all kinds of woe.

Like death should be understood in the sense of dissolution in the physical as well as in the psychical sense, so birth should be understood in the sense of conception, physical and mental. Thus rebirth and death do not occur only once at the beginning and the end of a lifetime respectively, but at every new thought-moment, so that the saying, “*quotidie morior*”: I die daily, (I Cor. xv. 31) receives an unexpectedly new meaning in the Buddhist sense. It is the wrong view of seeing death only at the end of a life-time, which produces that misconception of a self, transmigrating life to life.

Death is not caused by birth, neither is sorrow, but both are dependent in their arising on the fact of birth. Thus birth is the *conditio sine qua non*, the *upanissya-paccaya*, the condition of sufficing efficiency. It is the natural disposition (*pakatu-panissaya*) of any birth to give rise to sorrow; not the cause thereof, but the necessary circumstance under which that relation obtains an indispensable, antecedent phenomenon. The characteristics of decline (*jarata*) and impermanence (*aniccata*) are natural to all matter that exists. They are not produced by any principle at all, i.e., not by kamma, mind, season or nutriment. (*Lakhanani na Jayanti Kechiciti Pakasitan*).

Where suffering is dependent on birth by which it is conditioned, birth itself is caused by kamma.

“Dependent on the kamma-process of becoming is rebirth” (*bhava-paccaya-jati*). It is the active kamma process which produces the passive rebirth-process (*uppatti-bhava*), where the reaction has worked out, where the result (*vipaka*) has to be outlived. It is the will to live that makes one live again. It is this lust for life which conditions the kind of life to come. No other doctrine can explain the difference which appears, though outward conditions may be absolutely the same. This process of becoming is volition transmuted into action with skilful or unskillful consequences. As soon as the opportunity is favourable it will reproduce itself, express itself, according to the nature of the means of expression at its disposal. Thus it is that the process of kamma is the process of becoming and the cause of rebirth.

The differences can be observed even where external conditions of parents, blood and food are equal as in the case of twins, cannot be without a cause, cannot be mechanical products for they do not always happen to all. As in the subjective continuity of those beings no other reason can be found, the process of becoming must be due to kamma.

It is true that there are many who wish to give this doubtful honour to some supernatural intervention. But this explanation, instead of solving the problem inside the process, induces a mysterious factor from outside, thus making the problem even more complicated and unsolvable indeed. It is no good trying to explain a mystery by one still more intricate. Moreover he, who claims the honour for the good, ought to take also the blame for the evil.

It is the kamma-process which leads to rebirth, like a flame burns on through its inner nature in a process of combustion. And like a flame will always lay hold of new material to express its process of craving. For kamma is essentially volition.

Dependent on clinging arises the kamma-process (*upadana – paccaya – bhavo*). From the different kinds of clinging it can be understood how subtle is its working and how difficult it must be to escape its meshes. There is the more gross clinging to sensuous pleasures (*kamupadana*). Though few are able to free themselves entirely from this snare, it is not so difficult to be at least aware of the danger. All spiritual men have given their warning; have spoken in praise of control over the senses.

But not only the body with its natural passions must be tamed; the mind which guides the activities of the other senses ought to be controlled its wild activities and fancies checked. A forcible repression of the bodily senses only will naturally result in a reaction which might be dangerous from a mental point of view. Suppressed passionate tendencies have often led to serious hallucinations; and if that suppression is done with a supernatural motive, it always leads to fanaticism, where sometimes blood-thirsty hate is taken for love for truth.

The clinging to erroneous opinions (*ditthupadana*) is, therefore much more dangerous because where error is seen as the truth, all further consequences will be seen in the wrong light even though their deduction be correct, - like a sum cannot be worked out properly, even if the method be correct, if there was an initial mistake in the thesis. One of the most common erroneous opinions is the one which sees motion everywhere and nothing moved without a cause, and yet maintains that there can be a mover who moves all but not himself.

The clinging to mere ritual (*silabbatu-padana*) is the superstition e.g., through outward washing inner purity is sought. Similar actions can be classed as spiritual bribery and only betray a lack of moral courage and sense of responsibility. It is not only an over-valuation of means to a certain end, but a reliance upon inappropriate actions which are, therefore, not means at all.

The clinging to the belief in a self (*attavadupadana*) is the most subtle of all and hence most difficult to overcome; it is the fetter of self-illusion (*sakkaya ditthi*) in all its twenty modes, which prevents one even to enter the Path to holiness (*sotapanna*). It is this root of selfishness which underlies all growth of kamma and of rebirth. It is the heat of the fire which keeps the water boiling and makes ever new steam develop.

But this clinging could not arise, if there were not craving first. Through craving is conditioned clinging (*tanha-paccaya upadanan*). It is craving for sensual pleasures (*kama-tanha*) that leads to sensuous clinging. It is craving for eternal existence (*bhava-tanha*) which gives rise to clinging to the belief in a self (*attavadupadana*). It is craving for annihilation (*vibhava tanha*) which is the origin of clinging to erroneous opinions (*ditthupadana*). By not realizing the necessity of effects arising from causes, the possibility of further effects will be overlooked and thus rebirth denied. Craving for annihilation might also lead one to employ inappropriate means to nullify karmic reactions by superstitious practices (*silabbatupadana*).

Craving is the real turning point, the crank which sets the wheel of rebirth, the machinery of life and death, aworking. Craving imparts selfishness, that is, the I-concept, to mere sensation, thus fertilizing the seeds produced by previous action. Here with craving the problem of rebirth is given anew, and with the cessation of craving this problem is solved. In the process of craving, kamma is conceived which in due time will grow out into rebirth and death – like from friction the spark is born which will grow out into a conflagration. With this process of grasping is given the explanation of individuality, for life is a process of grasping.

If craving is dissolved, the whole world becomes a mere play of the senses, where the self is no longer an actor. Where the self does not act, there is no kamma and no more rebirths, so that with the ending of craving the turning of the wheel of Samsara will have come to a stop.

This, however, does not explain the beginning, the origination of craving. Craving, clinging, desire, volition, will, is not a force which is stored up to be discharged at any moment, but it arises anew over and over again; and in its arising lies the meaning of this whole play of world-events. For apart from this 'I' the world has no meaning. The 'I' is a reaction; and without this reaction how can action be known? This reaction is sensation, and on this sensation is dependent craving (*vedana paccaya tanha*).

Here again, sensation or feeling is not the cause of craving, but merely a condition, for without sensation no craving can arise, and yet not all sensation needs to produce craving. Here alone a break is possible; here alone in the long chain of conditioned reactions it is possible to come to a stop. If all feeling would result in craving with all its evil consequences, the attainment of Arahantship and Nibbana would be impossible. Like a seed *can* grow up into a plant under favourable circumstances and yet those circumstances, however necessary, are not the cause of the plant, but mere conditions to its growth, - so sensation *can* develop into craving, if the conditions thereto are favourable. The favourable condition to the arising of craving is ignorance, for if knowledge of the real nature of things were present, craving would be impossible. It is thus to ignorance (*avijja*) that we shall have to trace the origin of craving.

Feeling or sensation in any of its three modes of pleasure, pain or indifference, in so far as it is a karma-resultant, is the condition without which no craving can arise (*vedana paccaya tanha*). Thus pleasurable feeling; might give rise to craving for more; painful feeling to craving for freedom therefrom; and indifferent feeling to craving for its tranquil sensation. Feeling, however, cannot arise without contact (*phassa*), sensation cannot arise without the senses (*salayatana*). Here it is already seen that the causal chain of dependent origination (*paticca samuppada*) should not be understood as a pure succession of cause and effect; it is the growth, the development, the evolution-process where the successive stage is contained in germ-form, as it were, in the preceding one, requiring only the proper conditions to sprout forth. Thus in the six senses of mind and body are contained the possibilities of contact and sensation. Similarly in consciousness (*vinnana*) are contained the other three mental groups of sensation, perception and mental formations (*vedana, sanna, sankhara*). Thus it is said that through consciousness are conditioned corporeality and mentality (*vinnana-paccaya-nama rupan*) and that dependant on the six senses of body and mind arise contact and sensation (*Salayatana-paccaya-*

phasso). Consciousness and its mental concomitants, hence also sense-impression or contact and feeling or sensation, are all simultaneously arising and hence related in the sense of co-existence (*saha-jati-paccaya*), as a candle which is burning, burns together with its heat and light. But they are also mutually supporting one another (*anna-manna-nissaya-paccaya*), like “when three sticks are set upright leaning against one another at their upper ends, each of them depends on, and is depended on by, the other two – if one of them falls all will fall at the same time.” (*Ledi Sayadaw*).

Consciousness itself, however, is a product of kamma-formations in the past (*sankhara-paccaya vinnanan*). Like the kamma process in the present (*kamma-bhava*) will produce birth and its consequences, so the kamma formation of the past (*sankhara*) have produced this present conscious life. Like the kamma-process in the present finds its origin in craving and clinging, so the kamma of the past was formed in ignorance (*avijja paccaya sankhara*). Craving and ignorance are synonymous. Craving is ignorance for in ignorance we crave for things impermanent, sorrow fraught and substanceless.

Further back than ignorance we cannot go, for if there would have been a time when there was no ignorance, there ought to have been knowledge supreme. But to say that knowledge supreme has produced ignorance is as non-sensical as to say that perfection could produce imperfection, that goodness could produce evil. Ignorance thus stands as the sufficient reason for life, when life is seen as a process of grasping.

Is ignorance then the ultimate beginning of everything? This question so frequently put is ignorance manifest.

To speak of a beginning where there is no entity is a sheer impossibility. A process can *have no* beginning, but *is* beginning constantly, can have no end, but is ceasing constantly. Not to understand this is ignorance; and dependent on ignorance arise the kamma-formations, which through processes of conscious grasping lead to rebirth which is sorrow-fraught.

It is in ignorance that the I-concept is formed; it is in craving that the I-concept is maintained. Ignorance creates a delusion, and craving clings to it. And thus comes about this whole play of world-events which turns round the ‘self’ like a wheel round its axle. But as, when the axle is broken, the wheel will not turn any more, - so when the delusion of self is destroyed, when

insight has destroyed ignorance, no further craving can arise, no further kamma can be formed; when wheel of samsara will no more turn; the process of becoming and rebirth will have come to a stop.

When ignorance thus gives rise to craving, the freedom from craving can only be obtained through the overcoming of ignorance in the insight into the real nature of things. Ignorance also is a kind of under-standing; it is mis-understanding; it is cognition with craving and thus it leads to formation, i.e., kamma. But cognition without craving *that* is right understanding which does not lead to further formation of kamma.

This understanding is not to be obtained by mere reasoning. Through purity of virtue, through renunciation and mind-control, insight will grow, insight into the real nature of things. When things are seen as void of self and impermanent, they will be understood as sorrow-fraught; and the first Noble Truth will be understood. When it is further seen that all our disappointment arises from our craving for things void and impermanent, then craving will become an impossibility. If there is no more craving, there will be no more kamma-process of becoming, resulting in rebirth. Thus while ignorance stands as the origin of all this suffering through grasping, insight alone offers the deliverance therefrom.

Where a beginning as ultimate origin cannot be pointed out, just because there are no entities but more processes rolling on, - because nothing has a beginning but is only a phase in the process of evolution which is always beginning, - yet this process can come to a stop simply by no more beginning, by no more becoming.

“Let past be past, no future longings house:
The past is dead, the morrow not yet born.
Whose with insight scans his heart today,
Let him ensure eternal changelessness!!”

This goal cannot be attained by striving, for striving under any form keeps the process moving. But the truth has to be lived so that it may grow naturally, till the light of insight will have dispelled all shadows of ignorance, and the deliverance from all craving, which is the bliss beyond all feeling, will have surmounted all happiness and sorrow in the cessation of becoming, Nibbana.

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